

The Path of Dreams

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I run to you
 ceaselessly
on the path of dreams
Yet no night of dreams
could ever compare
to one waking glimpse
 of you

Ono no Komachi
c. 833–857

Preface

The Buddha's Disciple

After New Year's, *Obon* is the most important of Japan's national holidays. Also known as the Feast of the Lanterns or the Festival for the Dead, *Obon* is the time set apart for the veneration of our ancestors. The time dedicated to the restoration of familial and generational ties. The time when we remember the dead.

The Japanese is an abbreviation of *Urabon*, a phonetic reduction of the Sanskrit *Ullambana*, meaning "to hang upside down." It represents the suffering of those "hungry ghosts" whose sins have forestalled their reincarnation and consigned them to the torments of Hell. On the final day of *Obon*, the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month (according to the old calendar), the Ruler of the Earthly Realms grants forgiveness to all such benighted souls and thus upon all humankind. For none of us pass from this life pure.

The Festival finds its beginnings in the *Urabon Sutra* and the story of *Maudgalyayana*, a disciple of *Shakyamuni Buddha*. Soon after his mother's spirit passed from this life, *Mokuren Sonja* (as the Japanese pronounce his name) discerned her to be suffering the tortures of *Ullambana*. Water boiled upon touching her lips. Everything she ate turned to ash.

In despair, *Mokuren* sought out the wisdom of the *Buddha*, who told him that his mother's bad karma was the consequence of a life given over

to petty greed and stinginess. To merit her release from hell, Mokuren had to practice *dana*, or selfless giving, on her behalf. He was commanded to summon the ten sanctified priests from the Ten Worlds to his temple, tend to their material needs, and entreat them to perform for his mother a proper memorial service. Mokuren was further instructed that he must sincerely thank his mother for all she had done for him during her life, her failings and shortcomings notwithstanding.

This gratitude he expressed and these rites he performed. Because of his filial piety, his mother's soul was reborn into the Pure Land. Mokuren lit bonfires to show her the way and danced with joy at the knowledge of her redemption.

All these elements of the first Obon remain with us to this day.

In the modern era, the festival is celebrated from August thirteenth to the fifteenth. We light small ceremonial fires, welcoming the spirits to our hearts and homes. As Mokuren served his elders, we too leave offerings of food, flowers, and incense upon the house altars. The dance of the *Bon Odori* brings friends and neighbors together as we celebrate the harmony of all creation made possible by the disciple's example.

On the evening of the final day, the *okuribi* bonfires burn like stars on the mountains, lighting the way to heaven. We cast paper lanterns upon the waters to guide the spirits of the dead back to the Pure Land. As they slip from this mortal realm, dancing along the paths of the ceaseless currents, the words of the Buddha are not lost from our thoughts, reminding us always:

The weight of obligation we owe our ancestors is as boundless as the heavens.

Chapter 1

Snapshots

Elaine Chieko Packard had a guilty conscience. *Dreams*. She felt guilty about dreams. But dreams so real she could almost believe she was not dreaming at all. One simple fact reminded her that these fantasies existed only in her mind: she was a *missionary*, for crying out loud.

Good girls—especially good girls who went on missions—didn't have dreams like this. Good girls didn't do a lot of things. They didn't open their mouths when they kissed. They certainly didn't go *all the way*. They didn't get to the on-ramp, or even leave the driveway in the first place. *Other* girls did, the girls passed around like a wad of used chewing gum. And how gross was that?

As a teenager, Elly sat in church and listened to the lessons on morality and chastity, mesmerized by the images her imagination could conjure up. The slasher movies of moral peril. It was like watching the last scene in *Time Bandits* over and over: “*Don't touch that! It's pure evil!*”

The subject was petting. Sister Summers approached it with half a dozen euphemisms and half a dozen frightening quotes from dead General Authorities before Jennie Howell finally blurted out, “But it's okay once you get married, isn't it?”

Sister Summers turned pale and changed the subject.

Elly considered the whole thing a pointless exercise. The girls who *did*

fool around weren't listening. They weren't in class. They were sleeping in Sunday morning after a late night spent doing everything the rest of them were being told not to. The girls who weren't going to weren't going to. She'd known since puberty that she'd never stand anywhere but squarely in the wasn't-going-to camp.

Abstinence made sense to her. What she didn't get was this incredible paranoia over *losing* it. To be sure, Sister Summers wasn't paranoid. Only timid and easily embarrassed. Now Brother Collins, Elly's Seminary teacher, *he* was paranoid. Every lesson on morality came down to *us* versus *them*. Her honor and good name hung in the balance. *They* were going to get her, like the dumb girls in the horror flicks always running *up* the stairs instead of *down*. One scream of regret. Disgraced for life.

The problem was, Elly never felt gotten to, pursued, tempted. She felt, well, left out. Men were supposed to be the sex with sex on the brain. But women's magazines were obsessed with it. At the supermarket, she'd mosey over to an empty register and sneak a *Cosmopolitan* off the rack. What *does* a man expect of a woman in bed? She had no idea. How *can* you have the best sex ever? Ditto. Is *he* your sexual soul mate? Not a question that would ever come up in a temple preparation class.

The occasional boy who kissed her awkwardly at the end of a date didn't arouse her to any breaking point. Didn't arouse her at all. But deep inside herself, she desperately wanted to believe she *could* be propelled to a soul-shattering act of wantonness—that it could overpower her *completely*.

"Don't you wonder what it's like?" Jennie Howell whispered to her one day after Seminary. They were walking back to the high school, textbooks clasped against their chests like body armor. Elly shrugged as if she never gave it a second thought. She had a closet full of second thoughts.

"I mean," Jennie went on, "I know *for a fact* that Karen Andersen *did* it with Jeff Clark, and they were both in church on Sunday. I mean, if you *killed* somebody you wouldn't show up in church the next Sunday."

Jennie thought too much about these things. So did Elly. She just didn't make it a matter of public conversation. The subject was too hypothetical, too imaginary. Like a travel brochure to a distant, foreign land.

She stood at the back of the Barnes & Noble, the fat romance paper-

back in her hands. Curiosity, that's all. Yet she lingered over the words as she read. She saw in her mind's eye, like a voyeur at the rear window, the man's hands slipping inside the woman's blouse, their lips parting—

Elly cast her eyes about furtively, as if the pictures in her mind were being projected in Technicolor on the high walls of the bookstore.

She knew about pictures—the time at Girl's Camp when Becky Hoggan took a picture of her in the shower. Becky was not a good girl. Becky was the kind of bad influence they warned her about in church. But Sister Johannson looked upon her as a lost sheep worthy of being fellowshipped back into the fold.

The shower was a solar-powered contraption. It consisted of a black metal tank exposed to the scorching summer sun, a coil of PVC hose, a valve, a showerhead, and a blue plastic tarp stretched around a crude two-by-four frame. Elly was rinsing her hair in the thin, lukewarm stream, her back arched, her head flung back, when she heard the *click* of the shutter.

She glanced over her shoulder with a doe-eyed expression in time to catch a flash of sunlight off the camera lens. Without her glasses on, several blurry seconds passed before she realized what was going on.

“Becky!” she squealed, crouching down and covering her breasts with her arms.

“Just kidding. You're out of film.” She held up Elly's little Olympus.

“That's *not* funny.”

Becky laughed. The corner of the tarp flapped back into place.

A week later, Elly showed her slides at Mutual. Anyone who'd brought a camera to Girl's Camp had to. Witty, self-deprecating asides helped. Incriminating photographs helped too, as long as they weren't *that* incriminating.

Elly had neither. She clicked through her slides with sparse commentary. *This is the campsite. This is the lake. This is Jane and Sister Johannson.* Good grief, why hadn't she sorted through these slides first? *This is Becky in her fatigues.* A pretty good picture.

“This is—” Elly had to stop and say, “Oh, this is the shower.”

A few hoots from the boys at the back of the recreation hall. Some applause from the girls in the front. Unlike the boys, the girls were not

amused by the prospect of running around for a week like feral children. No one else had thought of taking a picture of the shower. *How very clever of her!* Elly's thumb pressed down on the button of the remote. *Wait a minute, had she thought of taking a picture of the shower?* The carousel clicked forward, the slide popping up from the lens housing, the next one falling down into the cradle.

She hadn't thought of taking a picture of the shower.

Becky had.

Elly hit the back button. A purely instinctual reaction. The gut to the spinal cord to the tendons to the fingers. A blur of peach and blue flashed on the screen, followed by a moment of white. The picture of the shower snapped back into focus.

"Hey, we already saw this one!"

"Uh, it jammed." Elly leaned over the projector, her body blocking the light. She pulled off the carousel and stepped into the shadows behind the bright cone of light.

"Um, I guess that was the last one." Her heart was pounding so hard she could barely breathe. Sister Johannson stepped toward her. She was going to reach out her hand and say, *All right, Elly, hand it over.* Then the bishop was going to take her to his office, shaking his head with profound disappointment. He'd summon her father. Then her *mom* would find out. Elly would claim it wasn't her fault. Who knew what Becky would say, but no one would believe her either.

Elly eased herself into the closest seat, holding the carousel against her chest the way a drowning man clings to a Mae West. Sister Johannson said cheerfully, "Who's next?"

LaRae Cordner sprang to her feet, a slide carousel in one hand and a boom box in the other. "I am!" LaRae could turn five minutes of kindergarten show-and-tell into a Broadway production. No one would remember Elly's slides afterward. That suited her just fine.

Late that night, Elly sneaked her father's slide projector into her room. She locked the door, pulled the blinds, and closed the curtains. Why had she believed Becky? Then it occurred to her: *the Photomat at Smith's Grocery!* Some pimply-faced kid manning the developing machines had seen *every-*

thing! She'd never go there again.

The image pulled into focus. Elly exhaled in surprise. She'd seen herself naked before in the mirror. Coming out of the shower. In passing. The human body didn't offend her. She could look at Leonardo's *Venus de Milo* or Michelangelo's *David* without blushing.

But this was different. To begin with, it was *her*.

She tipped the projector so the image displayed unbroken on the ceiling. The lack of shame in the display, the casual innocence in her nudity, that's what made it so—*different*. Wasn't she supposed to be embarrassed, mortified, chagrined? She wasn't. She didn't know this person. *Yet this is who I am*.

She lay back on the bed and stared at herself. The dark cascade of her hair, the supple muscles of her back and belly. The concave slope at her waist. The smooth curve of her breasts set against the vibrant blue.

She wasn't unattractive. Really. It was an extraordinary revelation.

Elly hid the slide where no one would find it.

But that moment haunted her—her thumb resting on the button of the remote—when her family honor and good name hung in the balance. Foresight was not her forte. Hindsight wouldn't have helped at all. It was only sheer dumb luck that she'd stopped it in time. Sitting in church, she relived that moment over and over. Her heart pounded in her chest. Sweat trickled down her back. Teen angst meets post-traumatic stress syndrome.

That moment came back to her at the Barnes & Noble. She looked at the glossy book cover, the bare-chested Fabio look-alike, his hugely muscled arms wrapped around a buxom, raven-haired woman about to burst out of her décolletage. It was the wrong book. She'd picked it up by accident. Good girls didn't do things like that.

She put the book back on the shelf and strode to the remainder racks. That night, Elly Packard decided she would go on a mission when she turned twenty-one.

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